Bolivia Defends Traditional Use of Coca Leaf After U.N. Calls for Criminalization

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The Bolivian government, headed by President Evo Morales, a former coca-grower activist, stepped up its international effort to defend the traditional use of the coca leaf after the UN called for its criminalization in Bolivia and Peru. The international body claims that the legal market for coca in those countries contributes to the illicit trade of cocaine, while indigenous traditionalists of the Andes defend chewing coca, a mild stimulant, as a centuries-old campesino tradition.

UN wants Andean countries to ban all traditional uses

A report released in March by the UN agency charged with enforcing narcotics treaties also urged the governments "to establish as a criminal offense" using the leaf to make tea, flour, and other products. The report says consuming the leaves from the bushy Andean plant used to make cocaine plays a role "in the progression of drug dependence." The annual report by the Vienna-based International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), an update on drug-control efforts worldwide, angered the leaders in Andean nations where coca is grown, especially

Bolivia's Morales, a former coca grower who has called for legalizing the leaf and brought coca with him to a speech he gave to the UN shortly after coming to power. "In Bolivia, there will never be a policy of zero coca," said Hilder Sejas, spokesman for the vice ministry of social defense. "To do so would walk all over the rights of millions of Bolivians for whom coca is a symbol of our cultural identity."

Morales' representatives traveled to Vienna in March to reject the abolitionist call by the INCB, calling instead for "the sacred leaf" to be removed from the list of dangerous drugs. The coca plant contains trace amounts, less than 1%, of the alkaloid that in large quantities can be used to make cocaine. Andean campesinos chew it for its mild stimulant effect, which helps ward off hunger and can make labor in high-altitude regions easier.

Coca advocates point to uses for the leaf that include nutritional, ritual, cultural, and medicinal practices. A 1961 UN treaty stipulates that governments must gradually eliminate coca chewing and other traditional uses of the leaf as well as attempt to eradicate the plant. Trade in coca leaves is allowed only for scientific purposes or as a flavoring agent as long as the alkaloids are removed.

"Nobody doubts the medical value of coca, heroin, or cocaine, just as nobody denies their illegality under the 1961 convention," Philip Emafo, the Nigerian president of the INCB, said in a telephone interview from Vienna. "If the provisions of the convention are being breached, the board in its wisdom, or lack of wisdom, is obligated to act."

Referring to the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs ratified worldwide, the report calls on Peru and Bolivia the second- and third-largest cocaine producers in the world, after Colombia to
"consider amending their national legislation so as to abolish or prohibit coca-leaf chewing and the manufacture of coca tea."

No evidence of toxicity or addiction in 4,000 years of use'

Bolivia ostensibly in violation of its treaty obligations allows the use of coca in its natural form. Wade Davis, a Washington-based author and botanist who studied coca in Colombia for his 1996 book One River, said coca's treatment as a narcotic as dangerous as heroin and cocaine in the UN convention is "absurd."

"Coca is as vital to the Andes as the Eucharist is to Catholics," said Davis, who is also a National Geographic Society explorer-in-residence. "There's no evidence of toxicity or addiction in 4,000 years of use."

Policy Consortium, a network of drug-policy experts, said the ban on coca was based on outmoded science and reflects "harsh and narrow judgments that condemn countries that permit traditional coca use and the industrialization of coca." In his 2006 speech before the UN General Assembly, Morales lashed out at the criminalization of the coca leaf. "This coca leaf represents Andean culture, it is a coca leaf that represents the environment and the hope of our peoples," Morales said, holding up the leaf.

For his 80th birthday, Cuban President Fidel Castro received a cake baked with coca flour from Morales. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, also a critic of the US-backed policy of forced coca eradication, said on Jan. 11 that he chews coca daily. The Venezuelan leader is also paying for the construction of a factory in Bolivia to produce coca tea, flour, and other natural products.

David Johnson, US assistant secretary for the bureau of international narcotics and law enforcement affairs, said the US is concerned about Bolivia's stated goal to increase coca production for traditional uses from 12,000 to 20,000 hectares. "We believe that the policy, as it's been articulated to me, is not consistent with Bolivia's obligations under international law," he said at a Washington press conference Feb. 29 to present the State Department's annual report on international anti-narcotic progress.

Why don't you stop drinking Coca-Cola first?'

Bolivian governmental representatives and activists regarded the INCB's demand as an attack on their culture, with vice minister for coca and integral development Geronimo Meneces saying the UN should recognize that "coca in Bolivia is a culture and tradition, because coca in its natural state is not cocaine."

Government Minister Alfredo Rada said, "We reject the INCB report, it seems to us to have a highly colonialisit content." "Who has died consuming coca?" asked coca-growers leader Hernan Justo, president of the Asociacion Departamental de Productores de Coca de La Paz (Adepcoca). "No one has died consuming coca." In the Peruvian newspaper La Republica, one cartoon depicted a balding man in a suit pointing an accusing finger at a farmer dressed in indigenous clothing and leading a sheep. "You have to stop chewing coca leaf," commands the man in a suit. "All right, then" says the farmer. "You stop drinking Coca Cola."
A series of marches against the report are being organized in Bolivia to demonstrate against the INCB, including a proposed occupation of the Coca-Cola facilities in the city of El Alto and demonstrations in front of the UN headquarters in Bolivia. In the past, cocalero groups have called on Coca-Cola to remove the "Coca" from its name. Adepcoca leader Hernan Centeno accuses the transnational company of making "bad use" of the leaf.

Coca-Cola released a statement on March 15, 2007, saying Coca-Cola has never used cocaine as an ingredient but did not say whether the natural coca leaf was used to flavor their soda. "For proprietary reasons, the Coca-Cola Company does not disclose information about what flavorings we do or do not use," Kari Bjorhus, a spokeswoman for the Atlanta-based company, said.

The ingredients are safe and in compliance with regulations, she said. The 1961 UN treaty stipulates that governments may allow international trade in coca leaves as a flavoring agent as long as the alkaloids are removed. That is how Coca-Cola Co. uses the leaf, Dominic Streatfeild, author of "Cocaine: An Unauthorized Biography," said from London. "We know very well that Coca-Cola buys coca leaf in Bolivia," said Margarita Teran, president of a commission from the Constituents Assembly rewriting the Bolivian Constitution. "I remember in Chapare [a coca-producing region] they bought it," said Teran in 2007 when her commission proposed Coca-Cola remove coca from its name.

The company rejected the call and said its brand is recognized under Bolivian law. "They need to understand our situation," said David Herrera, a state government supervisor for the Chapare region. "They exported coca as a raw material for Coca-Cola, and we can't even freely sell it in Bolivia."

While the Morales government has a "zero cocaine, not zero coca" policy, US reports have claimed that a large majority of coca production goes to illicit uses, rather than less-profitable traditional use. In December, the Bolivian government said it had exceeded annual coca eradication goals by eliminating 5,778 ha of illegal coca plantations. The policy of eradication happens in concert with the US, although Morales' call to expand the total acreage of licit plantations from 12,000 ha to 20,000 ha has met with US criticism.

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